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## Putting a stop to dangerous monkey business

By Joanne Bourbeau

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Recognizing the serious public safety risk, Vermont prohibits the private ownership of primates -- chimps, macaque monkeys, and others -- as "pets." And Vermont's own U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords, along with Sen. Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, is taking the lead to make the rest of the country safer by introducing the Captive Primate Safety Act.

Their legislation will ban the interstate transportation of apes, monkeys, lemurs, marmosets, and other nonhuman primates for the pet trade. It will be heard on Tuesday in Jeffords' Committee on Environment and Public Works. The committee and Congress should take swift action.

Across the country, pet primates have become a reckless and dangerous fad. Last summer, an Ohio truck driver stopped to avoid hitting a runaway macaque. The monkey jumped into the truck, bit the driver and fled. An animal expert later told a detective on the case that, because of disease risk, he would rather have a lion or tiger on the loose than a macaque.

Before that, two chimpanzees proved just how dangerous primates are, when they escaped their enclosures and mauled a California man and his wife. Three months and a dozen surgeries later, the man was finally allowed to emerge from a medically induced coma -- but he still has a long road to recovery.

It's estimated there are 15,000 nonhuman primates in captivity in the U.S. They are often purchased as infants, readily available for sale on a number of Internet sites. Cute baby monkeys become aggressive as they grow older and these animals can be highly dangerous. The average homeowner quickly learns that he or she cannot provide the appropriate housing, veterinary care or diet that primates require. At least 100 people have been injured by captive primates in the last decade, 29 of them children.

"The Captive Primate Safety Act is a common sense solution to a potentially very serious problem," said Jeffords, the ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. "Monkeys, chimpanzees and other nonhuman primates can be dangerous if not cared for properly and can pose an even greater risk to our public health as carriers of dangerous diseases. Our legislation is needed to help federal agencies control and monitor these species within our borders."

Primates are highly intelligent and social animals that live long lives. They have complex social and psychological needs, but are typically kept chained or confined in small, sterile enclosures. In order to render the animals less dangerous, owners often mutilate them by removing their teeth.

Threats to public safety and animal welfare are perhaps eclipsed by the public health time bomb just waiting to explode. Primates can spread dangerous diseases such as yellow fever, monkey pox, Ebola and Marburg virus, foot and mouth disease, tuberculosis, herpes-b, and Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV), the primate form of HIV. Nearly every macaque monkey in captivity carries the herpes-b virus.

A number of states and communities -- like Vermont -- already prohibit private ownership of

nonhuman primates as pets, but the patchwork of local laws and interstate nature of the primate pet trade call out for a federal response. The Captive Primate Safety Act is similar to a bill that passed Congress unanimously in 2003, prohibiting the interstate commerce in tigers, lions and other dangerous big cats for the pet trade. Like the big cats bill, the primate bill will crack down on the exotic pet industry but will have no impact on zoos, medical research and other federally licensed facilities.

We need to end this dangerous monkey business. Primates belong in the wild, not in our back yards and basements. For our own health and safety -- as well as the animals' -- Congress should act swiftly and pass Jeffords' bill before the next child is mauled by a chimp.

Joanne Bourbeau is the New England regional director for the Humane Society of the United States, based in Jacksonville.